

Abbot Walter Bower of Inchcolm and his *Scotichronicon*

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This paper has the character of a report on work in progress, and does not present mature conclusions. But those of us who for fifteen years or so have been engaged in the production of the new editions of the *Scotichronicon* which is currently being published at the rate of one volume per year by Aberdeen University Press have now in 1991 reached the half-way stage with our new Latin text with English translation and editorial notes. It is possible now therefore to offer some thoughts about Walter Bower and his great book, as a preliminary to a more developed discussion scheduled for the last volume of the new edition in 1996. We are more and more convinced that this book is one of the national treasures of Scotland, which should be studied in depth for many different kinds of enquiry into Scotland's past; and it is our hope that in translation for the first time it will attract the attention of a wider readership than it has enjoyed in recent years. This paper has the comparatively narrow aim of setting out some guidelines on matters of interest to historians of the medieval church in Scotland that are to be found in Bower's book.

First we have to recall the facts about Bower's life which themselves illustrate one kind of career open to late medieval Scottish churchmen.¹ Apart from the fact that he was born in Haddington in 1385 his family background is uncertain. He

¹ The abbreviated titles of books used in these notes follow the list in the Supplement to *Scottish Historical Review*, xlii (1963). See *Inchcolm Chrs.*, 236-9 for some biographical notes on Bower with references. These are corrected and supplemented in an appendix in Marjorie J. Drexler, "Attitudes to Nationality in Scottish Historical Writing from Barbour to Boece", Edinburgh University thesis (1979), 278-83.

sought training as a regular canon, perhaps because he did not have the means then necessary for a university education abroad,² which was the usual preparation in the late fourteenth century for a successful career as a secular cleric. He was accepted into the community of the Augustinian order who served St Andrews Cathedral presumably c.1400, that is the community to whom his home church of Haddington was appropriated.³ James Biset, the prior of St Andrews at the time, himself a graduate of Paris and Avignon in canon law, encouraged his novices to take up serious academic study in theology and canon law,⁴ so that when the new University at St Andrews was founded in 1410 with Prior Biset as one of its sponsors,⁵ young Bower was sufficiently prepared to take degrees in Canon Law and Theology.⁶ Thus was he groomed for senior office in the Augustinian Order, and he was duly blessed as abbot of Inchcolm in April 1418 at the age of about 32.⁷ This was a house of medium size, and in the early 1420s and again in the mid-1430s he sought promotion to the much wealthier house at Holyrood.⁸ But these ambitions were thwarted, and he

² D.E.R.Watt, "Scottish university men of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries", in *Scotland and Europe 1200-1850*, ed. T.C. Smout (Edinburgh, 1986), 2-3.

³ I.B.Cowan, *The Parishes of Medieval Scotland* (Scottish Record Society, 1967), 79.

⁴ *Joannis de Fordun Scotichronicon cum Supplementis et Continuatione Walteri Boweri*, ed. W. Goodall (Edinburgh, 1759) [cited as *Chron.Bower* (Goodall)], i, 373. This old edition is cited here only for the parts of the work not as yet covered in the new edition, *Scotichronicon* by Walter Bower, ed. D.E.R.Watt (Aberdeen, 1987 -) [cited as *Chron.Bower*].

⁵ D.E.R.Watt, *A Biographical Dictionary of Scottish Graduates to A.D. 1410* (Oxford, 1977), 51.

⁶ He held the B.Dec. (i.e. Bachelor of Decrees or Canon Law) by the time of his promotion as abbot in 1417, and had become S.T.B. (i.e. Bachelor of Sacred Theology) in addition by 1420. It is here assumed that he qualified for both degrees at St Andrews, failing evidence that he went abroad; but no relevant records survive at St Andrews to prove the point (cf. *Inchcolm Chrs.*, 40-1; *Cal.Scot.Supp.*, i, 232-3).

⁷ *Chron.Bower*, viii, 111.

⁸ *Cal.Scot.Supp.*, i, 232-3; iv, 104; Cameron, *Apostolic Camera*, 20-1.

remained abbot of Inchcolm for over thirty years until his death in 1449.

Augustinian houses were subject to annual visitation by the diocesan bishop, in this case the bishop of Dunkeld. To judge from the surviving documentation, successive bishops of that see must have found Bower active in performing his duty of protecting the property of his abbey, though hampered by attacks by pirates from time to time.⁹ But then it needs to be remembered that Edinburgh is within sight of Inchcolm, and that any abbot of Inchcolm was numbered among the magnates of Scotland. This implied public duties in the government of the country. We therefore find Bower attending royal councils and parliaments from time to time, and he could be asked to undertake judicial business in parliament.¹⁰ He was also several times appointed to help in the collection of various special taxes which were levied throughout the country after the return of King James I from captivity in 1424.¹¹ He continued to be engaged in the general business of both church and state during the minority of James II after 1437; but he must in the last ten years of his life have devoted most of his time to literary work, for he mentions throughout his book various dates when he was compiling particular sections. We must bear in mind therefore that the *Scotichronicon* was put together by a churchman with an academic training who had wide experience of affairs of both church and state. He was a man who could stand back from his sources and ponder on the implications of past experience for the problems of his own day. And clearly he was a man who regretted the passing of King James I and hoped for a restoration of firm rule once the young James II was old enough to govern himself.

How does Bower's book fit into the historiography of later medieval Scotland? John of Fordun in the 1360s – 1380s had put together the first substantial chronicle which is known to have

⁹*Chron.Bower*, viii, 137; *Inchcolm Chrs.*, 58.

¹⁰ *Acts Parl. Scot.*, ii, 22-3, 60.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, ii, 5, 20; *Exch.Rolls*, iv, 654; *Chron.Bower*, viii, 241.

existed in Scotland, divided into five books coming down to the mid-eleventh century, and provided with a collection of notes thereafter down to its own lifetime.¹² Bower was asked by his neighbour Sir David Stewart of Rosyth to provide him with a copy of Fordun's work brought up-to-date,¹³ and this Bower completed in no less than sixteen books i.e. his work is some three times as long as that of Fordun. Traditionally Bower has been pejoratively described as Fordun's "interpolator"¹⁴ – as if Fordun had written some kind of sacred text which it was sacrilegious to enlarge. In fact Bower simply did the job that he was asked to do – and it adds up to something much more massive and stimulating than the comparatively primitive work of Fordun – "an undistinguished man who was not a graduate of any of the schools", as it was said of him by someone who knew him.¹⁵ Curiously Bower shows no knowledge of the famous historical poem in Scots written by his fellow-canon of St. Andrews Andrew of Wyntoun earlier in the fifteenth century,¹⁶ though clearly both Wyntoun and he used some of the same sources. His own book was very unwieldy – and presumably very expensive to copy – so that he himself produced a shorter version while the longer version was still being composed, into which he introduced various minor corrections and additions. Then in 1461 an amalgam of Fordun's book and Bower's book was produced, which has been edited under the name of *Liber Pluscardensis*,¹⁷ and in the early sixteenth century an abbreviated version of Bower's own shorter version was produced, which goes under the name of *Extracta e Variis*

¹² *Johannis de Fordun Chronica Gentis Scotorum*, ed. W.F.Skene (Edinburgh, 1871-2).

¹³ *Chron.Bower* (Goodall), i, Prologue.

¹⁴ E.g. by Skene (*Chron.Fordun*, i, Preface).

¹⁵ *Chron.Bower* (Goodall), i, Prologue.

¹⁶ *The Original Chronicle of Andrew of Wyntoun*, ed. F.J.Amours (Scottish Text Society, 1903-14).

¹⁷ *Liber Pluscardensis*, ed. F.J.H.Skene (Edinburgh, 1877-80).

Cronicis Scocie.¹⁸ The corpus of surviving manuscripts of the Fordun-Bower materials in these different versions adds up to about twenty; but the aim of the new edition is restricted to making available Bower's work in its fullest form as corrected by himself up to his death.

Fordun was believed in the fifteenth century to have travelled in England and Ireland as well as Scotland to collect his information;¹⁹ and it is certainly possible that he did so in the 1360s while Edward III was cultivating the Scots with a view to securing the succession to the Scottish crown for one of his sons.²⁰ But Bower did not certainly ever travel outside Scotland (though there are some hints of contacts with the English counties on the border with Wales). The only library that he mentions was that of the Dominican friars at Edinburgh.²¹ Possibly like the imprisoned Englishman Sir Thomas Gray (the author of the *Scalacronica*) in the mid-fourteenth century he consulted the collection of English chronicles kept in Edinburgh Castle.²² He pretty certainly consulted one or more chronicles now lost which in his day were kept at St Andrews (as did Andrew of Wyntoun),²³ and it seems most likely that it was there in the library of the cathedral monastery that he consulted the many Classical Latin authors and Church Fathers whom he quotes; and perhaps also he found there the various more recent books from the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries which he used. We now know that for much of his material on continental history down to 1250 he made very extensive use of the writings of the Dominican Vincent of Beauvais, with or more

¹⁸ *Extracta e Variis Cronicis Scocie*, ed. W.B.D.D. Turnbull (Abbotsford Club, 1842).

¹⁹ *Chron. Fordun*, i, pp. xlix-l.

²⁰ But his name does not appear in any of the safe-conducts issued by the English government for Scottish clergy to visit England between the return of King David II from captivity in England in 1357 and his death in 1371 (cf. *Rotuli Scotiae*, i, 815-942).

²¹ *Chron. Bower*, v, 377.

²² A. Gransden, *Historical Writing in England*, ii (London, 1982), 93.

²³ *Chron. Bower*, v, p. xvii.

usually without acknowledgement.²⁴ Among fourteenth-century writers he is able to quote appositely from the theologian Robert Holkot and the mystical writer St Bridget of Sweden. He often found biblical quotations or allusions to hand to illustrate or support a point in his arguments; and specific references to the corpus of Canon law from time to time show that he had not forgotten his university education.

On a simple factual level Bower's book provides information for the church historian on the dates of appointment and death of many bishops and abbots in Scotland. In the one case of St Andrews this is amplified by more elaborate biographical notes on the bishops and priors of the cathedral monastery there.²⁵ These may well have been largely copied from materials kept at St Andrews, which were then amplified by information from his own personal knowledge. The St Andrews bishops, therefore, through Bower's work have been remembered in as much detail as those commemorated in Boece's *Lives* of the bishops of Aberdeen and in Myln's *Lives* of the bishops of Dunkeld.²⁶ It is not surprising to find also items of information about other monasteries of his own Augustinian Order in Scotland. We find that he includes with approval a letter sent out by James I to all monasteries of the Benedictine and Augustinian Orders in Scotland demanding a revival of their standards of behaviour.²⁷ It is striking that he writes with admiration of the founding by that king of a house of the strict Carthusian Order near Perth.²⁸ We get the impression that he was genuine in his desire to secure higher standards among the regular clergy of his day. Some of his information is derived from his abbey of Inchcolm itself, and information about some happenings at the nearby Benedictine house at Dunfermline also came his way, especially concerning

²⁴ *Ibid.*, Preface.

²⁵ *Chron.Bower* (Goodall), i, 339-76.

²⁶ *Hectoris Boetii Murthlacensium et Aberdonensium Episcoporum Vitae*, ed. J. Moir (New Spalding Club, 1894); A.Myln, *Vitae Dunkeldensis Ecclesiae Episcoporum*, ed. C. Innes (Bannatyne Club, 1831).

²⁷ *Chron.Bower*, viii, 317-19.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, viii, 269-75.

their attempts in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to take over control of the priory of Coldingham in Berwickshire from its mother-house at Durham.²⁹

The range of information which Bower selected for inclusion about people and events in the general history of the Western Church is too wide to summarize here. Just as he thought his readers should be informed about the main developments of the Western Empire from classical times to his own day, so did he select from his reading of continental authors (particularly Martin of Troppau and Vincent of Beauvais) many items of church history for his Scottish readers. Various popes are mentioned, of course, and attention is given to general councils of the church. His evidence here is important for establishing how far the Scottish clergy were represented at such councils, and how well Scotland was informed about the consequent reforming legislation.³⁰ The problems of papal schism in his own day (when the rump of the Council of Basel supported by a faction in Scotland was still maintaining a schismatic pope) led him to include a long history of papal schisms in the past to provide a perspective.³¹ The challenge of Wycliffite heresy, which he must have encountered in connection with the experience unfamiliar in Scotland of the heresy trials of James Resby at Perth in 1408 and of Paul Kravar at St Andrews in 1433, led him to include accounts of earlier heresies such as that of the Albigensians in southern France or Amaury de Chartres at Paris in the early thirteenth century. On the positive side he has information not only on the reformed monastic movements which spread on the continent from the Grande Chartreuse or from Cîteaux (with emphasis naturally on St Bernard), and on the orders of friars found by St Francis and St Dominic; but he is also interested in new liturgical developments such as the

²⁹ *Ibid.*, indexes, s.v. 'Inchcolm' and 'Dunfermline'.

³⁰ E.g. Council of Clermont 1095 (*Chron.Bower* (Goodall), i, 421-2); Second Council of Lyons 1274 (*Chron.Bower*, v, 399-401).

³¹ *Chron.Bower*, viii, 223-39. For the other examples in this paragraph see *Chron.Bower*, indexes.

introduction in 998 of the feast of All Souls on 2 November each year, or in 1264 of the feast of Corpus Christi on the Thursday after Trinity Sunday.³² And not surprisingly the Crusades receive repeated attention from the First Crusade onwards, with details even of obscure ramifications in Turkey and Armenia. From these examples we can get some idea of the depth of knowledge about developments in the history of the Western Church in general that became generally available in fifteenth-century Scotland through Bower's work. Information which had previously been hidden away in books available to comparatively few clergy was now being included in a book designed to interest a cultivated layman of modest social status who specifically approved of Bower's broad coverage.³³ Bower's work should be seen in the contemporary context of the growth of the opportunities for laymen to share in the knowledge of theology and church history which had for centuries been largely the prerogative of the clergy.

But in composing this book Bower was also plying his trade as a churchman. Alongside the information about the past which he assembled, we find him inserting other materials which were more of personal interest to him and which illumine his outlook as a churchman of his time. As a preacher himself, he chose to include from time to time quite a number of *exempla* i.e. entertaining stories with a moral point, which are often only marginally relevant to their context. The sources for these stories are apparently quite varied (and Vincent of Beauvais again provided some of them), but two series of stories attract particular attention. Mention of the death of King Philip Augustus of France (1180-1223) led to the inclusion at that point of no less than eleven anecdotal and undated stories about him.³⁴ This was partly because Bower admired him as "an ideal, a model and an example to be portrayed for every Christian

³² *Chron.Bower* (Goodall), i, 403; *Chron.Bower*, v, 325-9.

³³ *Chron.Bower* (Goodall), i, 379.

³⁴ *Chron.Bower*, v, 119-27.

king",³⁵ and partly because various collections of stories about this particular king had been handed down in oral tradition and then conveniently assembled in written form in the later thirteenth century. Here was grist for the preacher's mill. The king was, for example, said to have had confident and justifiable faith in God's protection from possible death in a shipwreck because he knew that at regular hours throughout the night the various branches of the clergy throughout France were in the habit of praying for him. We draw the conclusion that monastic prayers produced results. There is another story about how the king was approaching death and mournfully reflected that even though as king he had had servants to obey his every nod, he was now having to face his terrible judge of a Maker all by himself. So does it come to us all. And there is a charming story of a time when the king was tired of business and went for a refreshing row in a boat on the river Seine to have some peace. He was pestered by a friar running along the bank asking for a word with the king. Philip crossly agreed to let him make his request, provided it was expressed literally in a single word. The clever friar stretched out his hand and said: "Charity"; and of course the good king's heart melted! These are just samples of the whole series of stories about King Philip. They make for entertaining reading, and were no doubt intended to have an improving effect. And it is interesting that a collection of this kind about a French king had by Bower's time made its way to Scotland for him to explore. Another similar collection from which he drew *exempla* can now be more specifically identified, though it was for long a puzzle to the editors. This group of stories is scattered through different parts of Bower's book, and they are usually, but not always, attributed to a certain "Barbason", who is identified as the author of a book called "De apibus" ("On Bees"). It took us some time to work out that the author in question was Thomas de Cantimpré, a mid-thirteenth century Dominican friar, who lived for most of his career in his native Brabant and so came to be referred to by bibliographers as "Brabantinus" (a word which

³⁵ *Ibid.*, v, 119.

Bower corrupted to “Barbason”).³⁶ The stories given by Bower match those included in the early printed edition of Cantimpré’s book, which was a moral treatise on the proper inter-relationships of higher and lower clergy on the model of the behaviour of bees, with no less than 317 *exempla* as illustrations of his argument. Bower selected stories on various themes, such as the proper sense of responsibility which a priest should have for the care of souls in a parish entrusted to him; or how a canon was struck down by illness lasting twenty-five years for refusing to follow a legitimate order from an ecclesiastical superior; or on the best way to stir the senior clergy who were meeting in synod to rouse themselves to less neglectful behaviour, namely by threatening them with hell-fire for their negligence. These *exempla* therefore were not always introduced with a light-hearted intention!

From some other extracts taken from Brabantinus we can observe certain general themes which Bower wanted to introduce into his story as matters which were to him of some concern. Some of these themes were negative in the sense of matters regarding which Bower displayed his critical prejudices. His anti-Semitism is one of these. He has a report about pressure being put upon King Louis IX of France about 1240 to order the burning of all copies of the Talmud, because of the blasphemies which it contained against Christ and his Mother. The Jews are said to have bribed an archbishop to persuade the king to rescind this order, and they thought all would be well. But God struck down the miserable archbishop with a pain in his bowels that killed him within one day, so that the king took the hint and in due course ordered the book-burning to proceed.³⁷ And from Vincent of Beauvais Bower introduces two long tales with an anti-Jewish motif.³⁸ One is sited in Beirut, and concerns a

³⁶ Thomas de Cantimpré, *Liber Apum aut de Apibus mysticis sive de Proprietatibus Apum* (Paris, 1516); see E. Berger, *Thomae Cantipratensis Bonum Universale de Apibus*, Paris University thesis (Paris, 1895).

³⁷ *Chron. Bower*, v, 167.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, ii, 333-9.

crucifix which some Jews desecrated, but which, when blasphemously pierced by them, flowed with blood that miraculously healed sick people of all kinds when they were anointed with it. The consequence was a mass conversion of Jews to Christianity. The second tale is located in Constantinople, and also involves blood flowing from a crucifix when a Jew stabbed it, this time turning the water in a well into pure blood. The repentant Jew again was baptised as Bower tells the story, though in Vincent's version he was stoned to death by outraged Christians. Bower's alternative ending here surely provides us with a window into his over-simple critical opinion of Jews and his typical confidence in the effect of miraculous events in securing adherence to Christianity.

But it was not just figures outside the church whom Bower took the chance to attack. The clerical vices of simony and pluralism practised by ambitious churchmen were objects of his denunciation. He introduces into Fordun's text some details from Martin of Troppau about the papal campaign against simony in the mid-eleventh century, and then adds a timeless thought-provoking story from Cesarius of Heisterbach about the subtle nature of this vice. A certain Cistercian abbot had been elected after advising his fellow-monks that it would not be to their credit to elect an abbot from outside the monastery, knowing full well that there was no-one in the abbey except himself who was suitable for the position. When challenged about his behaviour by a saintly woman recluse, the man recognized that he had abandoned humility for ambition, and so was guilty of simony – and he resigned his abbatial office.³⁹ In retelling this tale Bower was certainly setting a high standard of behaviour for the monks of his own day. Then on the subject of the canonical fault of pluralism, he launched forth with a series of reflections after recounting the supposed fact that when William Wischard, the king's chancellor, was proposed for the bishopric of St Andrews in 1271, he had accumulated no less than twenty-two benefices.⁴⁰

³⁹ *Ibid.*, v, 439-41.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, v, 381.

This sent Bower back to Brabantinus for an *exemplum* dating from discussions about pluralism held in the University of Paris in the 1230s.⁴¹ Nearly all were agreed that it was wrong to hold more than one benefice if it involved an income of more than a certain figure. But two of the learned disputants had opposed this view, and the story goes on to tell how one of them after his death appeared in a dream to the bishop of Paris as damned to Hell and lamenting that he had in life kept back from the poor his excessive annual income. Bower continues with several other stories in which excuses for holding more than one benefice are rejected; and he casts doubt on the common practice of his own day whereby ambitious clergy accumulated a group of benefices with the benefit of papal dispensations from the strict rules of the Canon Law. There is unspoken criticism here of the papal practice of using the dispensing power in such a way that a man was allowed to commit a mortal sin. And Bower returns to a story drawn from the personal experience of Brabantinus, who as a Dominican friar related with some satisfaction the early and unsatisfactory deaths of four archdeacons of Liège, who all had incomes larger than was good for them. And St Jerome is quoted: "If the cleric who can support himself from his property takes anything more which belongs to the poor, he indeed commits sacrilege, and by abusing such people he eats and drinks his own judgement." We can catch here the scorn of a regular canon for the worldly attitudes of the secular clergy of the Scotland of his day.

It is not surprising that a fifteenth-century writer who implicitly criticised contemporary popes for their willingness to abet pluralism is found also to be critical of papal appointments of commendatory abbots to monasteries.⁴² Bower makes the point when describing the generosity of Pope Gregory the Great long before in founding and supporting many monasteries. It is interesting that as early as the 1440s, when Bower was writing,

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, v, 389-97.

⁴² *Ibid.*, ii, 103-5; cf. M. Dilworth, "The commendator system in Scotland", *Innes Review*, xxxvii (1986), 51-67.

he could be concerned with the abuse (as he saw it) of papal power in handing over existing monasteries to commendators, who could control the revenues of a monastery for their own advantage if they wanted to do so, for there had as yet been only one or two examples of this practice in Scotland – though it was in the succeeding century to lead to major adjustments in the use of monastic endowments to the detriment of the traditional religious and charitable purposes to which they were meant to be put. Bower says that he has heard of a case “where a hundred monks used to follow the religious life, [but] the commendator scarcely allows one chaplain to celebrate the divine office in the same place, although he was hardly sufficient in his own person to satisfy God according to his commission or commendation”. This case cannot have been a Scottish one, and there may well have been situations where it was advantageous for a commendator to be appointed in temporary charge of a monastery which had fallen into decay of some kind; but it is interesting that Bower chooses to take the chance to lay the blame on the pope. He is clearly not of a mind to accept all papal acts without question.

Another manifestation of papal authority against which Bower is regularly prejudiced is found in his accounts of the activities of papal legates. He takes over from Fordun a critical attitude to the activities of the legate Guala, as in 1217-18 he carried through his duty of reconciling the Scots clergy after their excommunication for opposing the papally-protected young King Henry III of England.⁴³ No doubt their attitude in this case is part of the normal anti-English attitude of both writers; but Bower considerably develops the picture of the simple honest Scots clergy being caught in the net of the wily bully of a legate. Papal authority is accepted as meant to offer protection and justice; but this papal emissary has treacherously gone too far as he sought “to slake the thirst of his moneybag with draughts of money and cups of gold”. The visit of the legate Otto to Scotland

⁴³ *Chron.Bower*, v, 93-9.

in 1239 is treated without heat,⁴⁴ but the activities in the 1260s of the legate Ottobono (who was denied admission to Scotland) are reported with snide remarks about how the Scottish clergy refused to obey his legislation and about the bulging character of his purse.⁴⁵ The papal collector Bagimond in the 1270s is tarred with the same brush as a costly guest in Scotland, "because, as the common saying goes, legates do not want to be entertained unless it is in a luxurious fashion".⁴⁶ Bower then introduces four stories from some unidentified source about the rapacity of legates in general, with emphasis on how abbots had suffered from their greed and unmannerly behaviour. These stories do not belong to any particular place or time, but presumably represent a common feeling about legates in the local provinces of the church. In Bower's case they may well have been included as a commentary on his own experience of the visit of the papal legate Anthony bishop of Urbino in 1436-7.⁴⁷ Papal authority was more popular at a distance than when exercised near at hand.

The obverse to these themes which aroused Bower's critical comments is the list of matters which he approached more positively. Again we have indications here of a fifteenth-century churchman's priorities (though not arranged in any particular order). His enthusiasm for the merits of the mass comes through in various ways. In connection with an item on the eleventh-century heretic Berengar of Tours he introduces an orthodox analysis of the doctrine of the sacrament of the Body of Christ: "The external form of the bread is eaten by anyone indiscriminately, the good and bad receive the Real Presence, but only the good man who is in a state of love (that is free from sin) receives the virtue of spiritual grace." And in support he quotes St Bernard, St Thomas Aquinas and St Bridget of Sweden, along with some traditional verses emphasizing the mystery of the

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, v, 165.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, v, 367-9.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, v, 403.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, viii, 297.

mass.⁴⁸ We are told that “these things of necessity require faith, do not at all admit of reasoning”; and that “the celebrant’s way of life does not affect the efficacy of the sacrament.” Here is straight-forward exposition of orthodox belief. But what are we to make of his long chapter with an enlarged version of contemporary popular tracts which circulated under the title “The Merits of the Mass”?⁴⁹ This piece of vulgarization is quite surprising in a man with an academic training and literary outlook, and reflects perhaps an over-riding priestly sense of responsibility for the care of souls that was part of his character. No less than twenty-six assertions about the practical advantages which may be obtained from hearing mass frequently are listed, with some of them said very doubtfully to have been derived from the writings of such distinguished figures as St Augustine, St Jerome, St John Chrysostom, St Gregory the Great, St Bernard, St Mechtild and St Bridget. There is little here about the spiritual benefits to be obtained from attendance at mass, and more on the typical late medieval belief in the practical benefits for souls in Purgatory when masses are said for them on earth. But the list also includes many challenging statements about the material benefits available as a result of attending mass e.g. a man will digest his food the better, he will have as much extra length of life as he spends at mass, he will be provided with the necessities of life for the day on which he hears mass, he will not meet sudden death on that day, nor lose the sight of his eyes. It is a shock to find Bower’s understandable flight from a reasoned justification for the mass taking him so far as this. And we may well ask what priests of lesser status than an abbot of Inchcolm were telling their flocks if this is what he was prepared to write. It certainly offers us a vivid understanding of fifteenth-century religiosity in Scotland. On a different level we can wryly appreciate why it was that Bower wanted to tell his readers about the adventures of Robin Hood and Little John in the woods of Barnsdale, for he had learned somewhere from the traditional

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, ii, 431-5; cf. viii, 145-7.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, viii, 139-45.

sources about these heroic figures that it was Robin's habit to hear mass so devoutly that he was unwilling to interrupt the service, no matter how great the pressure from the king's men!⁵⁰

Two other disparate aspects of church practices of the time are carefully underlined by Bower. The first of these concerns the church's right to tithe.⁵¹ Bower makes a point of adding several chapters to Fordun's account of the mission of St Augustine of Canterbury to England to relate an anachronistic and grisly tale about how Augustine would excommunicate anyone who refused to pay his dues to the church (though in fact tithe was not introduced into England until some two hundred years later.) It was emphasised that non-payment of tithes led to excommunication, and that led to perpetual torture in the fires of hell. After Augustine had supposedly by a miracle raised corpses from the dead to explain the point to a recalcitrant anachronistically-styled knight, the man saw the error of his ways: "He gave up all his possessions, took the tonsure and followed blessed Augustine all the days of his life as the author of his salvation." It was a powerful tale which Bower probably found in one of the various Lives of St Augustine that were in circulation. And it illustrates the need felt by churchmen of his day to frighten the faithful into paying their dues to the church.

The other practice of his time on which Bower chooses to place some emphasis is that of papal indulgence.⁵² The context this time is his addition to Fordun about the rules for celebrating the feast of Corpus Christi as established by Pope Urban IV in 1264 and amended by Pope Martin V in 1429 and the Council of Basel about ten years later. He knew of the papal bulls which set out an elaborate table of the number of days of punishment in Purgatory which could be reduced by attending the various services associated with this feast. He goes on to quote the section of the Canon Law which gave authority to popes to grant indulgences, and sets out a long list of other indulgences which

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, v, 355.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, ii, 93-9.

⁵² *Ibid.*, v, 325-31.

Pope John XXII had granted in association with various pious practices e.g. twenty-three years, twenty-three weeks and three days for saying the canticle “Magnificat” otherwise than at vespers, or forty days for saying a particular grace after a meal, or three years for as often as you say: “May the Virgin Mary with her merciful Son bless you”. We can see illustrated in these examples the centrality of the late medieval devotion to the Virgin Mary, but also the trivialisation of the theory of the “treasury of merits” of the church and of the Virgin and the saints, when no longer attached as in earlier times to specific and special activities such as the attendance at the dedication of a church or going on crusade.⁵³

Of wider interest are two passages where Bower sets forth the ideas he had collected about the qualities of a good prelate. Both are borrowed from earlier writers. One is credited to the early thirteenth century Alexander Neckam,⁵⁴ and delineates in detail a character that is fearless but humble, a model of behaviour. The other is selected from the writings of the fourteenth-century Robert Holkot, but projected back as a commentary on the virtues of the mid-thirteenth century Gamelin bishop of St Andrews, whom Bower admired as someone who had resisted pressures from the king in church affairs.⁵⁵ Now he generalises: “Every good prelate ought to be ready to defy princes and tyrants for the right of the church and for the truth of sound doctrine”. There follows a scholastic analysis of four qualities desirable in a church leader – upright conscience, strong powers of resistance, high degree of respect, and a great amount of benevolence – and the argument is illustrated by an elaborate allegory in which prelates are compared with elephants used by Indian kings in warfare, with the duty of leading the army of the church and of frightening evil enemies by the

⁵³ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, second edition (Oxford, 1983), 700.

⁵⁴ *Chron.Bower*, v, 165.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, v, 363-7.

trumpeting of their preaching. Modern bishops are encouraged to live up to this standard.

Perhaps there is a touch of sharpness here as Bower the abbot snipes at his brother prelates among the episcopate. There are two other passages where his emphasis is also probably derived from his outlook as a monastic superior. When mentioning the comparative flood of new laws issued by James I after his return from England in 1424, he comments that “some of them would have served the kingdom well enough for the future if they had been kept”, and then he notes what he claims to be a tenet of Canon Law: “It is not enough to establish laws if there is no one to see to their enforcement”.⁵⁶ There follows a series of reflections based on Aristotle and Valerius Maximus on the need for laws to be properly kept. For someone who had chosen to conduct his life under a religious rule, this was self-evident, and he takes the opportunity to expand on the point for the benefit of readers who were not so conscious of its fundamental importance for organised society. The other monastic nuance can be traced behind two chapters in which he offers philosophic reflections on man’s need for virtuous recreation.⁵⁷ “A perfect man also amuses himself the more freely for an hour so that afterwards he may devote himself more diligently to his work or his contemplation ... We rest to work, we do not work to rest.” In contrast to the contrived amusements of royal courts with jesters and gamesters, sports and merriment, he spells out honest recreation as consisting of “appropriate talk and discussion arranged between men”. It sounds very like the monastic concept of recreation, though he then goes on to argue the case more generally by offering a number of different standards by which any particular form of recreation can be counted virtuous – it should be appropriate to the status of the person, it should not harm other people, it should not be repeated too often or go on too long. Then we come back to the recreative power for a Christian that arises from the celebration of the

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, viii, 257.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, v, 41-5.

sacrament and the offering of consolation to others. Bower remains at hand to the preacher that a churchman in his position ought to be. We should not complain if he is true to his calling, but rather take satisfaction in drawing out from the glimpses of his personal feelings and interests that he chooses to let slip a better understanding of the place in the society of his time that was occupied by this well-educated, experienced and thoughtful prelate.

